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Shame On You: An Exploratory Study of Shame in the an African American Community

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SHAME ON YOU: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF SHAME IN THE AN AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

by

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Introduction

In the United States, dominant American culture has far reaching effects on processes and experiences, and emotions are not spared from this influence. Through our media, such as films, television, magazines, and increasingly now social media, Americans are instructed on the proper way to express and experience emotions, for example, characterizations of women in television show them being hyper-emotional, while men represented as the stoic, emotionally stable "rocks" in chaotic situations. Over time, these depictions contribute to our socialization process, and begin to inform how we expect other people with whom we interact to behave.

This socialization process sets the stage for the introduction of stereotypes, which are very general characterizations of groups of people, they often serve as mental shortcuts, allowing us to evaluate situations more efficiently. However, the danger in stereotypes lies in their generality; they do not accurately represent every individual in a group, yet are processed as though they do. Furthermore, stereotypes, when applied to under-represented groups, can be used to restrict the actions and achievements of these group members. African Americans, for example, are often stereotyped as being emotionally volatile. In the United States, it is not uncommon for African American women to be stereotyped as being "angry" or "mean," or for African American men to be viewed as emotionally dangerous. These stereotypes affect the way that African Americans are expected to express their emotions, and are often used as tools of oppression when enacted to marginalize the very real emotional struggles that they may experience. This stereotyping influences the way that African Americans are experiencing emotions within their own communities, and within their lives as a whole. This combination of forces provides a unique experience of African Americans and emotions that surely differs from that of other groups, even though we all belong to the greater American culture. Although this

difference can be identified informally, it is generally undertheorized and understudied in the field of sociology, and is equally absent in the subfield of the sociology of emotions. It is my intent to explore this phenomenon, and begin to provide insight into the interworking of the experience of emotions within the African American community.

Literature Review

A society's culture is described as the attitudes, behavior, beliefs, customs, habits, language, and values that are characteristic of a group, society, or organization in a particular place and time, the accumulated knowledge of which is passed to the next generation through socialization (Kendall 2006; Spradley and McCurdy 2002). Culture is an instruction manual of the attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and values of an organization or population of people that is passed down through the generations. According to Thoits (1989), emotions are appraisals of a situational stimulus or context, changes in physiological or bodily sensations, and free or inhibited displays of expressive gestures. However, emotions also come from the culture in which they are being experienced. Thoits (1989) reiterates that a cultural label can be applied to any of the aforementioned characteristics. If cultures inform people on how to behave in a given situation, is then it stands to reason that they also inform us on how to feel.

The Sociology of Emotions is for a body of work that articulates the links between cultural ideas, structural arrangement, and several other things about the way we experience feelings (Hochschild 1990). To understand fully this body of literature, the strong influence that a particular culture has on an individual's emotions must be examined. The concept of *emotion culture*, as told by Thoits (1989), provides complex ideologies for emotions; it consists of feeling and expression rules and elaborated beliefs held about the development of individuals affective processes. In more

depth, an emotion culture provides us with notions about how we should attend to, appraise, manage, and express our feelings (Hochschild 1990). It is reflected in our movies, books, laws, and other forms. A way that our emotion culture is imposed on the individual is through *feeling norms*, which are described by Thoits (1989) as being a belief about the appropriated range, intensity, duration, and target of a private feeling in a given situation. These rules or norms help shape our understanding of appropriate emotion expression in our particular culture, and can cause anxiety or distress if realized that we are not within the norm. In addition to the feeling rules or norms, Hochschild (1990) also defines the term "expression rules" as the unarticulated ground rules of social interaction. These are similar to feeling rules, however, they focus specifically on the display and the masking of feeling. The exchange between culture, emotional norms, and the compilation of these elements that results in the individual's expression of emotion is a complex system.

The United States, while having a dominant culture, also has many subcultures; therefore, the United States may have a great variety of emotion subcultures. An emotion subculture is somewhat of an underground culture, that exists within the mainstream. Emotion subcultures often hold variations of the norms and values of the more dominant culture. Currently, the research of emotion cultures and the sociology of emotions is limited, and literature studying emotional subcultures is even more scarce. However, Arlie Hochschild scratches the surface of research on ethnic emotional strategies. She states that depending on our location in the racial stratification system, certain ideologies and feeling rules can gain importance (Hochschild 1990). She poses questions that investigate minority members' responses to discrimination; will their responses reflect the dominate emotion culture, or will they assimilate? Or, will their responses reflect the

values of an emotion subculture to which they belong? To what extent do minority members have to exert more emotional labor than those who belong to the dominant group of the social structure?

I seek to investigate answers to these questions, and to contribute to this void in the literature through exploring the emotion subculture found in the African American community. Understanding the differences in the ways that African Americans perceive and display emotions, when compared to the larger, dominant emotion culture of the United States, is key to easing any social interaction between the two cultures. On a societal level, much confusion and mystery can cloud the messages sent between African Americans and those operating within the mainstream culture. Issues of police brutality, for example, and general inequality could be better clarified by a more concrete understanding of the way the two groups perceive emotions.

In a study conducted by Mastsumoto (1993), there is empirical evidence that suggests that there are differences in how different ethnic groups perceive emotions. His results from his study show that African Americans generally perceive emotions as being more intense than the other groups studied, specifically Asian Americans, Latinos, and Caucasians. It was also found that African Americans perceive anger more frequently than the other ethnic groups.

More recent research by sociologist Brené Brown has provided support for Mastumoto's conclusions. In her 2006 study entitled *Shame Resilience Theory: A Grounded Theory Study on Women and Shame*, Brown suggests that shame is a psycho-social-cultural construct. A major part of this theory is the importance of the role of the social and cultural in the experience of shame. The role of the interpersonal connections and cultural expectations both act as mediators for the experience of shame. The exploration of how cultural expectations are enforced provide a clearer understanding of how shame affects different populations of people differently. Brown (2006) found that the triggers of shame for the women she studied all revolved around their

"unwanted identities," which were all based upon stereotypes of how society's culture has determined how women are supposed to behave and what roles they are to take. For example, women felt shame around their roles as mothers, unwillingly being labeled as being pushy, or being criticized for their weight.

If women feel shame that is tailored to their experience as women and the expectations placed upon them by society, is it possible that African Americans experience shame that is triggered by their identity as African Americans in a society that ascribes their group countless expectations and restrictions on their behavior and roles? Ferguson, Eyre, and Ashbaker (2000) argue that that "unwanted identities" are the quintessential elicitors of shame (Brown 2006): "People perceive themselves as possessing an unwanted identity when they self-attribute, or when they perceive others ascribing to them, a characteristic that undermines their self-ideals" (Ferguson, Eyre, & Ashbaker, 2000: 136). This construct of explaining shame provides room to suggest that African Americans experience shame differently, perhaps even more often, given their unique experience as a heavily stereotyped and restricted racial minority.

The study of the sociology of emotions and emotion culture requires a macro lens; there are many different ways to study emotion, in many different contexts, and there are many different emotions to study. However, I am choosing to study one specific emotion, shame. In Sociology, the emotion shame has only been studied while in relation to other, similar emotions, such as pride, guilt, or embarrassment. There is a significant chasm in the literature when examining shame as its own emotion. Securing a single definition of shame proves to be a difficult task. The little research on the emotion is not able to agree on one definition, thus, there are many characteristics of shame that have been proposed. Generally, most agree that shame is considered a self-conscious

emotion, that is elicited by personal devaluation through social perception and interaction. Shame has also been proposed to be a type of negative affect, which is a natural or innate, universal and adaptive state. Although it may differ slightly across different cultures, shame is accepted as a universal emotion. According to Ellison (2005), the universal phrenology of shame includes feelings of being weak, small, inhibited, and confused. He goes on to argue that these feelings are experienced in response to perceived or inferred devaluation by others.

Shame is a complex emotion that draws on individual processes as well as interpersonal dynamics. For this reason, it has been studied both from a psychological and sociological lens. The emotion is elicited by personal devaluation and social selection, and is reinforced by individual cognitions centering on this negative affect, perceived rejection, and other reactions to potentially imagined thoughts and behaviors of others. Elison (2005) argues that the antecedents of shame include perception of devaluation or a disruption of social joining. Shame can also be produced by feelings of an insufficient performance of identity, which is exclusively grounded in evaluations from others that are perceived by the individual as negative. The individual then attributes this negative evaluation or failed act of impression-management to their personal value, which results in the negative affect that is shame. This characterization of shame suggests that the order of operations begins with a social interaction, but manifests and reproduces itself within an individual as a negative affect.

Shame has also been studied by sociologists in relation to status and power. Kemper suggests that status and power are universal emotion elicitors (Thoits 1989: 10). Different levels of these variables will elicit different emotions; adequate status results in happiness, too much power produces anxiety, and too much status leads to feelings of shame (Thoits 1989: 10). Shame also has been noted as coming along with feelings of being small, worthlessness, and

powerlessness. (Tangney, Rowland, Flicker and Hill Barlow,1996). This suggests that both feelings of too much status and too little power can lead someone to feel shame. Power continues to be a concept linked to shame in a discussion of Adler's (1956) theory of Human Development. He claims that to compensate for existing feelings of shame, an individual may seek ways to acquire more power (Scheff 1988: 9). Though shame's relationship to power and status has been briefly discussed in the literature, a clear determination on how the two interact has not been established.

Many of the perspectives presented cannot exist simultaneously. This contributes to the evident need for more research on shame to be initiated, as there is still room for much clarification and explanation yet.

Methods

Exploratory Work: The research conducted in this study will be exploratory in nature, not hypothesis driven. Exploratory research is conducted for an issue or topic that has not already been established as a focus of current research. This type of research is used to help determine if this subject is one that should be investigated more, as well as helps provide a direction for questions for future research on this topic.

Exploratory research is the best path to take while studying shame in the African American community because, as I stated before, the Sociology literature on shame itself is limited, and when applied to the African American community, is all but non-existent. Conducting this type of research on this subject will help the field to gain familiarity with the topics, as well as to assist in providing the first steps to gaining insight to how shame operates within the variable of race. Because there are limited resources in this topic area, I face the inability to formulate a hypothesis that will not be too general or too specific. This problem

reinforces the need for exploratory research, to meet the need for more insight on the topic, to assist in formulating more specific questions that can be tested as hypotheses. The goal of this research is just that: to provide some information on the subject of shame and how it varies within race, in hope of pushing a larger conversation on shame in the African American community, as well as pointing the field in a direction from which these topics will be best studied.

Sample: I use the MIDUS II data set, which surveys adults at Midlife in the United States with a national longitudinal study of health and well-being. The goal of this survey was to replicate the comprehensive assessment that was achieved with the original installment of the study, as well as to add biological and neurological components to the assessment. Data for the first study, MIDUS I, was collected in 1995, stemming from work of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Midlife Development. The goal that drove this series of work was to provide research on a understudied part of the lifespan, the middle ages.

Data were collected for MIDUS II in 2009, and is accessed here through ICPSR, or the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research. MIDUS II surveyed individuals from the general population, ages 35 to 86, through phone interviews and intensive self-administered questionnaires. These data included an oversample of five metropolitan areas. The particular oversample that I will be utilizing in this exploratory research is the Milwaukee Study. This subset of data from MIDUS II was added in order to further refine the second installment of MIDUS, and included a sample of 1440 African Americans who were recruited from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. These participants completed personal interviews, as well as a phone questionnaire that operated parallel to the assessments in the greater MIDUS II samples, as well

as MIDUS I. The goal of this oversample was to examine health issues in the minority populations. Parts of Milwaukee were sampled that were identified as being socially stratified by high concentrations of African Americans.

Variables: The variables observed in the Milwaukee sample are gender and age. Both men and women were surveyed, and differences on this variable were observed. The Milwaukee sample surveyed African Americans from ages 35 to 86. The survey included six questions about shame, and are listed as follows: did you have an argument/disagreement, did you avoid a disagreement, did anything happen to you at work/school, did anything happen at home, did any discrimination happen to you, and did anything else happen to you. Participants were asked these questions under the premise of "how shameful where you feeling?" Responses and further details on these survey questions will be discussed in the *Results* section.

Results

Upon observing the results, it is immediately noticeable that a small percentage of the respondents discussed their experiences with shame in their responses. Utilizing a self-report method for the exploration of shame may inform these low response rates. The social stigma that accompanies experiencing shame, and that further is experienced when admitting the existence of shameful feelings very well may have deterred participants from expressing their experience with shame. Social desirability often plays a role in influencing participants' responses on self reports. The need for social approval is a source of bias for many surveys, and could be at play in the Milwaukee sample as well (Philips and Clancy, 1972). Even after recognizing the low response rates, however, statistically significant findings in the data were still observed.

In the past week…How shameful were you feeling?
Did You Have An Argument/Disagreement

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Not at all	76	5.3	75.2

Not very	8	.6	7.9
Somewhat	9	.6	8.9
Very	8	.6	7.9
Missing	1339	93	-
Total	1440	100	100

Did You Avoid A Disagreement?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Not at all	137	9.5	81.1
Not very	12	1.0	8.9
Somewhat	11	.8	6.5
Very	6	.4	3.6
Missing	1271	88.3	-
Total	1440	100	100

Did Anything Happen at Work/School?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Not at all	54	3.8	84.4
Not very	2	.1	3.1
Somewhat	5	.3	7.8
Very	3	.2	4.7
Missing	1376	95.5	-
Total	1440	100	100

Did Anything Happen at Home?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Not at all	57	4.0	73.1
Not very	6	.4	7.7
Somewhat	7	.5	9.0
Very	8	.6	10.3
Missing	1362	94.6	-
Total	1440	100	100

Did Any Discrimination Happen to You?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Not at all	12	.8	66.7
Not very	1	.1	5.6
Somewhat	3	.2	16.7
Very	2	.1	11.1
Missing	1422	98.8	-
Total	1440	100	100

Did Anything Happen to You?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Not at all	34	2.4	75.6
Not very	6	.4	13.3
Somewhat	3	.2	6.7
Very	2	3.1	4.4
Missing	1395	96.9	-
Total	1440	100	100

Source: MIDUS II Milwaukee Sample (2009)

I constructed a composite variable that added these shame variables to capture overall shame. The frequencies for these variable are:

Shame Total

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
.00	1352	93.9	93.9	93.9
1.00	27	1.9	1.9	95.8
2.00	25	1.7	1.7	97.5
3.00	25	1.7	1.7	99.2
4.00	7	.5	.5	99.7
5.00	3	.2	.2	99.9
6.00	1	.1	.1	100.0
Total	1400	100.0	100.0	

Next, I ran an independent-samples t-test with gender as the organizing variable to determine if there were differences in overall shame reported by gender. There was indeed a difference: on average, men reported less experience of shame compared to women (t=-1.994, p=.000). On average, the mean for male self-reported shame was .095 (SD=.024) and the mean for female self-reported shame was .1587 (SD=.021). Both of these means were low, but note that men, on average, self-reported shame half as much as women.

I also ran a correlation between age and overall shame. As this sample's people aged, they self-reported less shame (Pearson's R=-.100, p=.000).

Discussion

The goal of this study was to conduct research on the experience of shame in the African American community. This exploratory research study was not hypothesis-motivated, but sought to begin the discussion on the unique way in which African Americans experience shame. The data yielded within-sample variation. We found that participants' responses varied dependent on their age and gender. Women were more likely to feel shame than men, which may be a reflection of the expression rules that African American culture has set for women. Men in the sample, on average, responded to the survey indicating less feelings of shame, which could also be a result of societal pressures for men to moderate their emotions in favor of appearing "tough," as an expression of their masculinity. Social forces and processes such as these, stereotypes, or feeling norms may all interact together to produce the different results in gender that were observed.

Age was also a variable that exhibited some within-sample variation. The data showed that as people get older, the less shame they report to feel. What are potential explanations for this trend, however? An investigation of norms around aging or comparison of social pressures felt as a young adult and as a person who qualifies for retirement may shed some light on these discrepancies. It may be found that as a person ages, they feel less and less pressure from society to respond and act in ways that are socially desirable. Are younger Americans subject to more stereotyping or emotion rules? It is possible, but further research will need to be conducted to better understand the underlying mechanisms for these differences.

Further research into the experience of those who exist within the intersection of race, gender, and age would be a worthwhile project, as their experiences with shame are surely to be different, and mediated by different factors. For example, how would an older African American

women's experience with shame and responses to the survey questions differ from a young African American male? More research that delves into these questions would certainly be worthwhile, and provide more insight to how shame varies even within the African American community.

Limitations: Although the holistic sample of the MIDUS II survey is nationally representative, the smaller subsample of the Milwaukee sample is not. The Milwaukee sample is comprised of African Americans of varied age from the modest Midwestern town of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. To be representative of African Americans in the United States, other variables, such as socio-economic status, income, or education, should be accounted for, and subsequently observed. As it exists today, a major limitation of the Milwaukee sample is its lack of ability to be generalized to the greater African American community. This deficiency in external validity will limit the results found, and require more research on the topic to be conducted for a more macro perspective on shame in the African American community to be understood.

The nature of a self-report survey also brings its own challenges and limitations to the sample and study. As discussed earlier, social desirability bias can influence how participants are to respond to survey questions on topics they deem sensitive. This could be an explanation for the observed lack of responses to shame-related questions. Utilizing a different research design may provide a better means of exploring this topic. Instead of a survey, perhaps an in-person interview would provide more insight on even the thought processes people are subjected to when asked about their experiences with shame. Facial expressions and body language could be observed, and be a new way to see the nuances of how people react to questions of being shamed or feeling shameful. Other methods could result in higher response rates, thus providing more opportunities for understanding the complex emotion that is shame.

Another limitation of this research is the lack of opportunity to compare responses of African Americans to other populations of people, such as white Americans, Latino Americans, or Asian Americans and their experiences with shame. Comparing our results to other demographics would provide better insight on how shame is experienced differently, and would allow for further questions on why the differences between race and ethnic groups exist. A means of comparison would add a dimension to the literature on shame, and allow more theorizing on the understudied phenomenon.

Conclusion

This study of shame from responses of the Milwaukee sample is meant to be the first step in the direction of studying shame in the field of Sociology. Shame is an understudied and complex emotion, and even less is known about how it is experienced by African Americans, a racial minority with a very unique set of social forces informing their emotional experience. This research identified some differences in the experience of shame between African Americans who were different ages and genders, but was not able to uncover the mechanisms for these differences. It is meant that some questions are left unanswered, as they serve to act as cues or baselines for future, much needed research on the subject. Sociologically, shame has never been studied in relation to African Americans, and thus this research seeks to begin a much-needed discussion on emotion cultures, emotion subcultures, and how race and emotions interact with. This niche established, this research contributes more questions for future research to explore, and helped shed light on the intersection of race and emotion for future research to uncover.

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